

Close

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That night, a turtlish car crept into the parking lot of the former St. Jude's School fifteen minutes after every other, passed more than a dozen vehicles huddled in regions of brightness, then backed into the dimmest corner, against the narrow band of woods. Crows riotously packing the high branches briefly lifted off and raised even more argument, then set-tled back to their ordinary din.

Elbow on the open window, Ed Lukens breathed clouds as he surveyed the other cars. Some had gathered under the tall, helmeted lamp in the lot's middle; the rest, in the first row of slots by the one-story brick building, faced the few bright, curtained windows and the regularly spaced floods.

He'd kept the ignition key partly turned; the dashboard clock read 7:20. Choosing what to wear had taken too long, what with his mother out for the evening with his married sister. The part in his flat brown hair hadn't fallen correctly, so he'd simply combed his hair forward, where it troubled his brow. Then there'd been that wrong turn, his brain's autopilot taking him initially toward work rather than here. He twisted his face into an imitation of disappointment, though once the expression was in place, he felt himself sinking into despair.

During mass two weeks ago, in the middle of the sermon, his sister had dropped the church bulletin into his lap and, with one red-nailed finger, tapped twice, sharply, at a notice.

Does meeting new people make you uncomfortable? Does small talk make you anxious? Afraid to get out of the house for new experiences?

Through the rest of the service, he'd imagined everyone in the congregation reading those sentences and thinking only of him, thirty-four, tall, and strange. At night he'd lie in bed, the window open in any season, listening. Not attending to the night's sounds exactly, but to the gaps between the sounds, he ached, the aggregate emptiness confirming his sense that everyone was truly alone.

Two weeks his sister had kept after him, mentioning the bulletin notice over dinner every other day when she and her husband visited. Coming tonight was meant to stop her wearying assaults. The evening had been difficult enough to this point; walking in late seemed impossible. He pictured people turning toward him, holding drinks, going silent. He couldn't face such attention. Just to be here was quite an achievement. Maybe another night, he'd manage to go inside.

He considered sitting a while longer, then driving a meandering route home. Probably his mother wouldn't be back until later, and he could lie that he'd attended, answering with shrugs when pressed for details.

Then he heard a failing muffler, and headlights swept his eyes. A four-door car,

streaked with old mud, appeared, and in the light from the center pole Ed could see, as the car paused, the female driver, pale and blonde, leaning over her hands, which clutched the steering wheel. She scanned the lot, moved forward hesitantly, then at last selected a spot one row from the building. The engine cut out, the sound of crows returned, but she didn't step out.

Ed waited, an unfamiliar certainty expanding in him like a dense bubble. She didn't leave her car when the dashboard clock read 7:21, then 7:22. All the while, the chorus of crows rose and fell, or shifted about, restless. Ed's breathing quickened. She couldn't take that first step from the car. She nearly hadn't come at all. What held *her* back? His own fears seemed to him so inexpressible, yet here was someone who surely shared them, a normal-looking woman of around his own age, from what he could see—and gathered inside the old school, even more people who would know what it meant to be paralyzed, stuck at what Ed's sister called "an inability to move to the next level."

The longer she waited, the more watching her from the darkness troubled him, but driving off would, he reasoned, draw attention to how he'd sat there all this time. He didn't want to be the kind of person who would watch someone this way. After setting a determined look on his face, he took out the key, opened his door, and unfolded his lanky frame into the cold night. His hand resting where his window should have been, he realized he hadn't raised the window. As he bent back into the car to insert the key, he heard the other car's door open. He willed the electronic window to hurry.

He emerged from his task to see the woman, wearing a white, fur-fringed coat, still standing by her car. He shut the door, knowing it would startle her, but she didn't budge. Something in his expression had shifted, he knew, but he couldn't quite reorganize his face and walk at the same time, so his pace across the lot became irregular. When she looked back at him and said "Hi," a bit loudly, he initially and instinctively turned away. Raised to be polite, he managed a "Hello" back in her general direction. She was already on the move for the doors; he followed. He entered the brightness under the tall lamp, then faced the first set of double doors into the high, open lobby; she held the door, her other hand hooked by a thumb between her purse strap and shoulder. She leaned inside, and he stepped quickly so she wasn't delayed by his approach.

"Thank you," he said faintly.

"You're very welcome," she said, passing him the door's weight. She passed him the next door as well, and they both muttered another exchange.

He considered her short-heeled shoes on the thin gray rug at the entrance. From the lobby, the single, half-lit hall ran directly to their left. Two distinct voices laughed, and then her shoes proceeded, snapping onto the tile. Her right foot slid noticeably out of the heel with each step. When, two rooms down, she turned left, Ed turned as well and entered a room that seemed too bright.

Entrances daunted him. Usually the tallest person in any gathering, at six foot three, even his slouch could not make him less conspicuous. Wincing slightly, he was met by the hellos of several people rising from their seats. One, a black man, surprised him by being taller. He shook hands all around. The only person whose eyes he briefly met was a priest, identifiable by the Roman shirt collar. He heard the woman from the lot apologize for being late, and he somehow picked up that she, too, was new to the group.

Ed didn't catch any names, as simply pushing a smile outward and grasping hands had required so much attention. "You can hang your coat over there," the priest told him,

indicating a wheeled rack. Ed did as he was told, and with his back to the others he became aware of his actions as if they were a choreographed performance he'd failed to practice. Before him hung floor to ceiling curtains; in a gap, he saw himself reflected. The metal hanger slid strangely from the pole, then plunged too shallowly into the first sleeve. The woman from the parking lot stepped in beside him to hang up her own coat.

She leaned slightly toward him. "I'm Kendra."

Stalled with the coat and hanger, he faced her. "Ed. Lukens." She gave him a quick smile and turned away.

Leaving the coat hanging jauntily, he looked for the nearest seat and took it, on a beige sofa whose front edge was threadbare, foam showing from beneath. He shook hands—for the second time, though he didn't re-alize that—with his neighbor. Dark hair streaked the back of the man's hands; his jacket bore a local union number over the left breast. Over a peach-colored shirt, Ed wore an earthily brown sweater his mother had given him two Christmases past. He'd considered, but rejected, a sports coat. A second glance showed his sofa-mate to be nearly bald, the hair far back on his head shaved close.

The priest raised a hand to attract Ed's attention. "I didn't catch your name." Ed hadn't said, in fact, and looked from the priest's pink, pocked face to the table behind his plastic chair, a potential harbor of coffee dispensers and some assortment of snacks. The table stood just under a wall-length blackboard. Instantly Ed wanted something in his hands and something to do with his mouth besides talk.

"I'm Ed Lukens."

The priest's eyes rolled upward to consult a memory. "We didn't speak before, did we?"

"Um..."

"On the phone. You didn't call me...?"

"No. No. I should have called." There had been a number in the bulletin.

"Oh, that's fine. It's just so I know how much food to bring."

"I eat too much of it," said the man at Ed's side, leaning forward on the sofa. Everyone laughed pleasantly. A piece of cake lay on a paper plate between his neighbor's boot-clad feet.

"You spoke to me, Father," said the other new arrival.

"Kendra," he said, pointing with satisfaction, though Ed supposed she'd told him her name only moments ago. "I remember our talk. I'm really glad you could come. We've just been chatting so far tonight, so you haven't missed anything. Let's just run through the names, and then I'll give the two of you my standard speech for newcomers," he said, making Ed twitch. Ed studied the cake on the floor but heard how the priest's voice kept shifting direction as he angled his talk back and forth between Kendra, seated to the priest's left, and himself.

The tall black man, Marshall, sat closest to the door in a chair that diminished his size by forcing him low and so far back that his knees were higher than the armrests. Kendra was next, on a chair of detached cushions. The priest sat beside her in what appeared to be a classroom chair of metal and stone. On the sofa perpendicular to Ed's, Yvonne, upright and thin as a corn-stalk, with sparse brown hair that stuck to her skull and hung below her

shoulders, sat beside Terrance, Ed's age but silver-haired. Ed thought Terrance looked pleased somehow; it had to do with the way he sat forward, the leather elbow patches on his sport coat resting on his knees, and his faint smile; Ed thought he wouldn't mind getting to know him. Pat shared the sofa with Ed. Somewhat out of sight behind Pat, so Ed had to shift about to see them, an Asian couple, Yok and Thomas, clutched each other's hands atop the woman's lap, their classroom chairs shoved together.

That they were Asian made Ed remember that there were important cultural differences between, for example, Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese, and his mind momentarily busied itself worrying that he might say the wrong thing. Then he switched to considering something more obvious: They'd come together. Could a couple feel mutually anxious about meeting others? Perhaps they were brother and sister.

"And you can call me 'Father' or 'Father Mike' or just 'Mike,' okay? First, anything we say here stays here."

"Well," said Yvonne, raising her brows.

Father Mike gave her a serious look. "You know what I mean. This is a safe place. What I mean is, we don't have to worry about saying something that might sound foolish, and no one here is looking to make you uncomfortable." Yvonne nodded to one side noncommittally. "Our aim is to get our experiences out in the open, as much as we're comfortable talking about them, and see what we can learn from each other."

The priest opened his hands to indicate everyone seated. "So: Anyone have any visitors in the last two weeks?"

A disjointed chorus of no's followed. Much to his surprise, Ed pictured Kendra coming to see him at his house. He'd arranged for his mother to be out. They'd sit together on the sofa...no, that didn't look comfortable. He'd scoot forward and back on the cushion, as he did now, unable to find the right spot. Better if they sat at the small table in the kitchen together. They'd cut fat slices from one of those store-bought poundcakes his mother kept in the freezer. Kendra loved them too. Then he'd hear the key rattle in the front door as his mother returned.

Ed's fingers clutched the cushion under him. Pat had said something he'd missed, concluding with, "I figure this dry spell can't go on forever."

"It could," said Father Mike. "There aren't rigid rules here. All relationships have elements of the unknown, the unexpected, right? Why should this be any different?"

"That earthquake in India last week," said Yvonne, and the others made sympathetic sounds. "It made me think. My life is difficult, but so is everyone else's, just in different ways. People died in that. People are without homes. Okay, this is stranger than what a lot of other people go through, but it's not like I'm the only person, which is what I thought ten years ago."

"What makes anything bearable is other people," said the priest. Ed studied the carpet's fibers in displaced concentration, because really it was other people who made life hard. "You think about all the terrible and amazing things we go through as individuals, all the events and catastrophes and what-have-you down through the ages, and what do people do afterwards? We tell our stories to each other. Somehow we make sense of things when we do that. We realize we have something in common, and we try, though it's not some perfect process, to come to some common understanding of what we've been through."

Ed caught a glimpse of the Asian couple hugging sideways, their close-cropped heads

leaning together.

Terrance tightened his lips together in a grin and scooted forward a bit on the sofa, preparing to speak. Beside him, Yvonne blinked a few times and looked at the floor.

"Last time, I was talking about how hard it is in a new place." To Ed, Terry seemed outgoing, trying to catch the eyes of each person in the room. "I have to assume, because I've moved before, I can expect the same kinds of things. And it's funny, well, not funny, but I've developed a kind of paranoia, where I think people already know things about me. Or like they're in on some secret I'm not in on."

"So which is it?" asked Pat as he rose in the direction of the snack table.

"You know, sometimes I feel there's a conspiracy and it's all about keep-ing me in the dark. And sometimes I think when people look at me they see somebody who's not fitting in, somebody...marked in a way."

Yvonne cleared her throat and straightened more. Ed consciously tried to force his own back into a more erect position; he'd sunk too low into the cushion. "Stages," she said. "Those were stages I went through. The con-spiracy and then the feeling different."

"They're really interrelated," said the priest, showing his hands laced together.

Ed remembered feeling those ways in grade school. Kids gathered by their lockers engaged in conversations to which he would never be privy. What did people talk about? At times he believed, probably rightly, that kids were talking about him, or about every other untouchable at school. He'd imagine the school empty, himself simply circling the hallways in a day of bright floors and silence.

Involved in his own thoughts, he'd missed some of what Terrance said, tuning back in on "...incident since I moved here." *Pay attention*, Ed told himself. He knew the importance of taking an interest in people, listen-ing to them so you could ask good questions that showed you wanted to know them better.

"Anyone else have anything strange happen Saturday night?" asked Yvonne. Everyone considered this.

"A visit?" asked Terrance.

"No...A dream?"

"I might have had a dream. Nothing new. Eyes. Big eyes." His hands opened like opposing C's.

"I get that a lot," said Pat, returning with another piece of cake and a cup.

"It might have been nothing," Yvonne concluded. "I wonder whether we're all—all of us who've experienced this—whether we're linked. Events in each of our lives might be connected. Or maybe not."

Utterly lost by this exchange, Ed watched Kendra's reaction; she seemed merely attentive.

Thomas told the group, "My wife and I were invited to visit some people in the Adirondacks next weekend." He had only the local accent, no trace of something foreign. This fascinated Ed, when people looked a certain way, but you couldn't conclude anything

from it. "They have a lodge up there. We decided not to go. It's too risky."

"You'd feel too exposed," said Pat.

Yvonne agreed firmly. "Anything could happen."

In the silence that followed, Pat picked up his cake and took a tremendous bite, his face staying engaged with the piece for some seconds as he managed it. Terrance and Yvonne took the opportunity to get themselves coffee.

"Maybe it would be helpful," said Father Mike, "especially for our new folks, if we each talked a little about our first or even long-term experiences. Then maybe the two of you," he said to Kendra and Ed, "can find some common ground. If you feel comfortable, you could share some of your own, um, accounts."

Glances ran around the group, Ed alone keeping his head down, and though Yvonne and Thomas both opened their mouths to speak, Kendra broke the moment. "The others won't stop coming." Ed's thinking seized as he waited for something more, words that would make sense of everything he'd heard tonight. She finally said, "Not coming like...visiting. That's stopped, or I guess it's stopped. But it's like I'm never alone now." Marshall pressed his hands together and brought them to his lips, thumbs tucked below his chin.

"Implants?" Pat quietly asked.

Breathing loudly through her nose, Kendra inhaled and exhaled twice. "It's the loss of privacy, you know? You set up barriers—who you let into your life, how close you let them get, what you tell people about yourself...Instead, *they* just...intrude."

Ed chose this moment to rise in the direction of the snack table; rather, some impulse drove him upward, though no conscious thought about food and coffee had come to mind. He saw the look Father Mike gave him; he was used to such looks, which was another reason he avoided social gatherings. Rules for when to speak, when to leave, how to serve himself, perplexed. Clearly, this time was wrong for rising. Once at the table, a panicked slowness overtook him; he watched his hands detach one paper cup from its nested fellows, a task that seemed surprisingly complicated.

"The first time was five years ago," said Kendra. "I live alone. My son stayed with his father when we split up, and they live in Colorado now. I'd gone to bed." Ed had a cup, but couldn't listen and choose among the three dispensers at the same time.

"My house is on an old farm property that nobody farms, so there aren't any other houses right there. It's maybe half a mile to the closest one.

"Anyway, at some point, I woke up. I thought at the time that I'd heard my son call me. For a minute I just lay there with my eyes open, and then I realized I couldn't move." To remember, she faced the ceiling. "I had the impression someone was in the room, standing by the bed, but the way I was lying there, I couldn't see him. So it was like that for a while, and I was terrified, terrified, and then there was a voice, kind of a voice in my head, but I wasn't sure I heard it. You know?" The hot water and coffee dispensers—one marked by a Post-It reading "DECAF"—were of a sort with a central disk that you depressed to expel the coffee. Splashing in the cup, the coffee sounded to Ed like a man urinating; he felt that he, at that moment, was that man.

"The voice was reassuring, even though I felt like it was maybe lying, that it didn't have any right to reassure me. I couldn't move, I suddenly wanted to see my son..."

Ed started back, but he noticed a bookmark-sized handout by the cake. The angle at which the handout was placed forced him to twist his neck, and the violet paper made the print difficult to make out. AVE? SAVE? Bold letters in four lines at the top spelled out Survivors of Abductions and Visitations by Extraterrestrials. Numbered items, ten in all, seemed to provide tips for handling such experiences. An odd humming began in his head, like the time he'd blacked out while donating blood. Standing awkwardly, tugged by Kendra's voice and the need to get back to his seat, Ed couldn't force the words on the handout into coherent sentences. Back hunched to make himself smaller, he returned to the sofa.

"I think I fell asleep again. I even dreamed. Dreamed of animals, rabbits, running in a field in the daylight. Then somehow, I was outside. I don't know if I was floating, or if I was being held up by someone, maybe just one person, but I could see the stars and the tops of some trees. I couldn't turn my head. I knew I was in my yard. I hadn't gone very far."

Facing the carpet, Ed heard the air whistling in his nose, and he tried to stop it by slowing his breaths. He bowed his head to sip coffee.

"It's okay," said the priest.

"I'll be all right," said Kendra, but her voice was thick, muted. Ed looked up and saw her swallow with difficulty. "The voice told me I wasn't going to be hurt and I didn't need to feel afraid. I had this sense, or maybe I thought this later, that whatever was behind the voice was looking for...a connection, just...time with me."

Ed noticed an approaching voice and soft steps in the corridor. Two men passed, one talking and the other listening; both looked into the room on their way, and then they slipped by. Ed recalled now the dozen or more cars in the parking lot. He saw a sentence in his mind's eye, and he read the sentence: *I am in the wrong room.*

"I don't remember after that. Either the stars kind of went out, or I blacked out, or something black went over me. I do remember eyes, eyes like Terrance mentioned."

"You won't forget those," said Pat.

"I remember turning around a lot with my arms out, like in a weird, formal dance. I don't know. When I realized where I was again, I was sitting downstairs. It's funny." She smiled at each person in turn. Ed managed to return the look. "It's funny," she said again. "I thought I'd come downstairs for something. So I got myself some orange juice from the fridge and walked back upstairs. I thought, 'That's not it. That's not why I came downstairs.' And I went to bed."

"The next morning, I got up, I did the usual things. I was in the bath-room, and I remember looking at myself in the mirror and suddenly remembering what had happened, that someone had been there and that I'd been outside, but not anything after that. Still. The other times...I remember even less of those."

A moment passed, and then Father Mike said, softly, "Okay."

"I find the visits reassuring," said Yvonne. "They remind me that they're real. If they didn't keep happening, I wouldn't believe them."

"But you never know when they'll come," said Thomas. "Sometimes it's several in a short period. And my wife and I are wrecks for weeks after-ward."

After a glance at the slice of dark window between the curtains, Ed kept his eyes

elsewhere; he felt his mind working, against his will, to con-jure the faces of insect-headed aliens half-veiled in the outer darkness. Even looking at his hand picking a piece of lint from his knee, he imag-ined a face forming and receding, forming and receding. He couldn't imag-ine why such a being would watch him. Certainly he wasn't worth pursu-ing. In the hall, the two men from the other group passed, returning. He wished they could hear what he was hearing.

"It's not like that for me," said Pat. "I mean, it's true, I get sort of jangly, my nerves are jangly for days. I get what you're saying, but I also like that they have a focus on me. I don't feel it's malign. I'm being watched, but, I have to say, it's not like being watched by a stalker or something."

"People feel very different ways about this," said Father Mike. "I think you need to integrate the experiences with your workaday lives. Talking can help you do that. This is something that you can't undo, and you should find a way to accept it. It's a mystery the universe is giving to all of you." Ed wondered why a priest would say "the universe" instead of "God." Except at church, Ed didn't often think of God, and when he did, he thought of a night that didn't answer back, the way Jesus' prayer in the dark garden was met by silence.

"My theory," said Terrance, smiling, which felt terribly wrong to Ed, "is that all visitations are linked. People see the Virgin Mary, ghosts, we see these things that come for us...They're all manifestations of some reality we're not fully aware of. They break through into our world. We think that all there is is what we can see; we're so closed off, when you think about it. There are realities just the other side of ours, like through a paper wall." He shrugged. "Things break through, and we see them a certain way. Maybe they aren't anything like what we picture or what we remember. You, uh—"

"Kendra," Ed surprised himself by saying.

"—Kendra, right—you remember some kind of assault, but maybe be-cause you were assaulted once as a teenager. Everything goes through this prism of our perspective, do you see what I'm saying?"

Even Ed could read Kendra's face, and he felt how the people in this room weren't helping her. He sensed, pressing from outside the building, even gathering at their backs, the presence of mysterious forces.

"Others scare me," he said abruptly. The line often ran through his head like a lyric he couldn't shake; now he said it.

"The others?" asked Father Mike, mostly turned toward Kendra. Yvonne had leaned forward to place her head close to Terrance's; she made her eyes wide until he looked back, and then she mouthed something.

"Others," Ed repeated, and the priest nodded with his whole upper body. "I hear how afraid Kendra is. I get afraid too. I don't think it's wrong to feel that way. I mean, you're being watched. We're all being watched, all of us. Maybe right now. And I think that's frightening. I don't think that I have to...integrate that."

"See—" began the priest, but Ed couldn't stop yet.

"I would like some things to be more normal in my life. But just talking about my life doesn't change it. Something has to happen. Maybe I have to do something. And that's been a problem. I'm thirty-four, and I'm not any closer to being comfortable in the world than I was at fourteen. There are too many frightening things. The world should be a lot easier to fig-ure

out. Things shouldn't be this difficult, should they?" He listened to the whistling in his nose again and realized he'd run out of sentences. He also realized that he wanted the priest to answer his question.

"Ed," said Father Mike, a stillness entering his features, "you're a very good person to feel that way."

Ed shook his head slightly, but said nothing. *Good* wasn't how he felt at all.

Most members of the group adjusted themselves in their seats. Father Mike tugged back his left sleeve to check his watch.

Then Yok stood, made sure everyone was listening, and spoke. "I think: Where they come from, nothing happens anymore." She made sharp ges-tures with her hands as a form of punctuation. "Their lives are complete-ly regulated. There's no color or music. There aren't any surprises. They come here and *take* us, and then they have something to tell each other. They have stories. Our lives are interesting because we're complicated, so they take us and tell the stories."

Marshall leaned out over his knees. "That's an interesting theory." He fixed Yok with a look, then shot his gaze at Ed, who jerked.

"It's something I feel very strongly," said Yok.

"Sure," said Marshall, settling back. He opened one hand to demon-strate his understanding. "Sure."

"My son's stopping in next weekend," said Pat, but Ed didn't listen much after that. Personal matters involving children and work surfaced. While several people discussed a route to work to avoid some recent con-struction, Terrance crossed to Kendra and said something Ed couldn't hear. He saw her pat his hand.

When Father Mike stood, Ed thought he might lead them in prayer. "If anyone wants the leftovers, go ahead," said the priest; then he and Pat carried out the coffee and hot water. They paused in the doorway as mem-bers of the other group passed in the hallway. "I'll lock up," Ed heard the priest say to someone.

Kendra had already gathered her coat. In the company of Yvonne, she tossed a cup in the trash can, and, chatting, headed out. Eyes unfocused, Ed stood between his seat and the coat rack. He felt the evening tearing away into unrecoverable pieces. The Asian couple picked up a piece of cake, said goodbye, and left. One coat remained on the rack; somehow he couldn't entirely recognize it. When he finally reached for it, Marshall, who'd been tidying the snack area and straightening the chairs, stepped in too close.

"You're a walk-in, too, aren't you," he said, squinting slightly.

"It's my first time here..."

"No. No. That isn't what I meant. I meant," and his voice both softened and deepened, "an *old soul*. A walk-in."

"Heh," Ed half-laughed, thinking that might be appropriate. He pulled his coat from the hanger without removing the hanger from the rack; when the second shoulder came free, the hanger bent, then sprang up-ward, tinged the pole, and fell off. Marshall collected it. "Oh, thanks."

Even before rising again, Marshall was talking. "I recognize you. I know you." Again, he gave Ed the narrowed look. "You're like me."

"I...I..."

"There are quite a few of us around. I see them in the grocery store, at the mall, and we nod to each other." He gave a knowing nod to one side of Ed, as if someone stood there. "I didn't know until one of them came up to me one day out at the park. I was watching some boys play basketball. A gentleman in a long coat came from all the way across the field, and the whole time I watched him coming, I knew he had something important to tell me. He finally got up to me and said, 'You have a message for the world,' and then he left. His eyes were totally black, like they were all pupil. Just like that, he was gone."

"A few days after that, I realized that I wasn't Marshall Price anymore. I hadn't been for a long time, maybe since I was a child. His soul had gone. Now I'm the soul of Uniac, from a planet in the Arcturus system. My message is peace and enlightenment."

"Peace," Ed repeated.

"I've taken many journeys. I can point out the stars I've visited."

"Guys," said Father Mike. Standing in the doorway, he flipped the lights off and on. "Time to go. Oh, the cake."

"I know I'll see you again," Marshall said.

"Marshall," said the priest. With one hand he held the cake plate; with the other, he pressed plastic wrap over a single fat piece. "Are you freak-ing out our new friend?"

Marshall bent his head slightly. "Father Mike doesn't like me to talk."

"I never said that. Come on."

Ed left first, relieved when the priest started talking to Marshall; Ed didn't like the thought of talking to him in the parking lot.

Outside, the temperature had dipped sharply; Ed felt it in his hands. He'd left his gloves atop his dresser. Only a few cars remained, his own buried in shadow at the far end. The door of one opened and Kendra stepped out.

Wrapping her arms around herself against the cold, Kendra came straight up to him. Her car rattled with uncertain life, and exhaust eased upward from the rear. Father Mike and Marshall passed him where he stood and said their goodbyes.

"I'm glad I caught you. I wanted to thank you." Ed watched amazed as her hand patted his coat's forearm, conveying the slightest pressure. "What you said meant a lot to me."

"I didn't say anything."

"You did. You tried to reach out. I think that was great."

"Oh..." He shook his head.

"So. I hope things get better for you." Her car coughed. Her hand went out again, only brushing his arm. "Anyway." She walked backwards two steps. "See you next time?" He worked to produce some answer, but she had turned away.

He watched Kendra leave: shutting the door, putting on her seatbelt, waving at him by twiddling her fingers—he returned the gesture—and then driving off. Marshall and Father Mike pulled away as well, leaving him alone with the commentary of crows.

At his car, he paused and surveyed the lot. *Next time*. Buried in his coat pocket, his fingers touched the keys, two for the house, one for the car. He slid one finger into the ring that bound them. He thought of seeing Kendra again.

A problem presented itself. How could he come to the next meeting? He hadn't belonged. Arguably, he had lied. He wanted to see Kendra at least one more time, he knew they could be friends, but he would have to tell her the truth.

He drew in a ragged breath and his lower lip twitched as if a current were passing through it. He didn't know the correct words, and then he did; he would say *I've never been abducted. I was in the wrong room. That's what life is like for me.*

He faced into the trees to think. Perhaps he could speak to Kendra in the parking lot before the meeting. Nothing in his life to this point had prepared him to think through what her reaction might be. He imagined speaking, but couldn't see or hear what might come from her. She seemed so nice; she might find it all amusing. Or she might feel, in some way, be-trayed. Linked solely by a misunderstanding, he might never see her again. He breathed the icy air and couldn't move, his situation, as far as he could judge, unresolvable.

His breath whistled rapidly through his nose, the only sound. The trees were still stuffed with crows; he could see their upright, nervous shapes, but they had gone silent. His chest tightened. The school floodlights and the high lamp in the parking lot blacked out, plunging him into a lake of darkness.

Then we opened the night, gathered him close, and hauled him upward into the deeps.

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